

*Space figures in million sq. feet.
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2,000-foot TV tower may pierce skyline

By Thomas A. Corfman and Blair Kamin
Tribune staff reporters

October 25, 2005

Imagine this addition to Chicago's fabled skyline: a futuristic, tweezer-shaped broadcast tower looming 2,000 feet over the lakefront as one of the world's tallest structures.

The digital age may soon bring this sleek, scissors-like conversation piece to the city, within clear view of the tourists at Navy Pier who will either ooh with awe or laugh with disbelief.

To be designed by prominent architect Cesar Pelli, the tower would help redefine Chicago's horizon. Rising above the skyline between the John Hancock Center and the Sears Tower, it would usher in a new era of daring, ultramodern architecture for the city. Another sensation would be a proposed Santiago Calatrava-designed skyscraper shaped like a drill bit.

The \$300 million Pelli tower would function as a platform for local television stations to mount their new high-definition broadcasting antennas.

Instead of building a conventional building that reserves roof space for antennas, the developers--J. Paul Beitler and LR Development Co.--are proposing the lower-cost option of a needle-thin, triple-spined tripod. At the top would be several floors for restaurants and an observation deck, and at the base would be a 400-car garage. The tapered space in between would be largely open, except for six large beams connecting the spires.

"It is a very intelligent structure," said Pelli, in a telephone interview from his office in New Haven, Conn. He compared the structure to a ship's mast, saying it will be "a very handsome form next to the water."

The proposed broadcast tower, which would be located along Lake Shore Drive between Illinois Street and Grand Avenue, would jump past the CN Tower in Toronto, which at 1,815 feet holds the title as the world's tallest free-standing broadcast tower.

But comparing tall structures is complicated, so much so that it can seem the height of absurdity.

Not a building

For one, the structure could not lay claim to becoming one of the world's tallest buildings because it isn't technically a building--its structure would not be filled with floors as in a conventional skyscraper.

Currently, the world's tallest building is the 1,671-foot Taipei 101 in Taiwan, but other superstructures are under development.

Among broadcast antennas, the proposed lakefront structure is taller than the CN Tower but would fall short of a guywire-supported radio mast antenna in North Dakota, as well as an oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico, according to reports.

Beitler, president and chief executive of the Chicago-based real estate firm that bears his name, confirmed the broad outlines of the project, which does not yet have city approval.

"We are not out to have the tallest building in the world, or the tallest anything," Beitler said. "That's simply silly because somebody will come along and build something taller. There have been a lot of tombstones put up for people who proposed the 'tallest.' The problem has always been financeability, and we have financing."

The project would be driven by agreements, not yet signed, with local television stations, which are preparing for a shift to exclusively high-definition broadcasting, expected to be required in 2009.

Beitler declined to comment on the status of any talks with broadcasters. Local television stations currently broadcast HDTV and traditional analog broadcast signals from the 1,451-foot Sears Tower in the West Loop and the 1,127-foot John Hancock Center on North Michigan Avenue, where they lease space.

But television executives have long wanted a third option that they would control, and in the late 1990s even floated a proposal for a free-standing antenna mast that would have been located either in the suburbs or on the West Side.

The selling point of the new tower is that high-definition signals need to emanate from the highest, least obstructed point.

Still, the new tower is not a done deal.

Neighbors overwhelmed

In addition to tough negotiations with broadcasters, the latest proposal will likely be an even tougher sell to Streeterville residents, many of whom already feel overwhelmed by new high-rise construction and suffocated by traffic generated by Navy Pier.

The proposed site, which is zoned for a 610-foot structure, is just a few blocks north of a riverfront parcel where another developer has proposed a 115-story condominium/hotel to be

designed by Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava that would also soar to 2,000 feet.

As originally proposed in July, the Calatrava tower did not include broadcast facilities. But developer Christopher Carley said he may eventually add broadcast transmission facilities to his project, called Fordham Spire.

"As the time goes on, there is going to be more and more demand for these high antennas, not only high definition," said Carley, chairman of Chicago-based Fordham Co.

He said he has not had any discussions with local broadcasters, and didn't think the newly proposed broadcast tower would affect his project.

Whether the lakefront could accommodate two tall towers so close by would depend on neighborhood residents, who Carley expected would raise several concerns to the broadcast tower.

"It's not the height per se," he said. "It's more traffic, density, blocked views and shadows."

Beitler said the Planning Department has been briefed on the plans.

"I think it would be very dynamic to have two great architects like this put up buildings so close to each other," said Beitler. "I think they are so completely different from each other it would be interesting."

The proposed broadcast tower would be on a 41,000-square-foot site owned by a joint venture that includes LR Development, a Chicago luxury residential firm, and JER Partners, a Virginia investment firm.

Thomas Weeks, president of LR Development, declined comment.

Beitler is a veteran office developer whose projects include the Pelli-designed 181 W. Madison St. and 131 S. Dearborn St. In the late 1980s Beitler and Lee Miglin proposed a "world's tallest" tower for a Loop site, but the deal ended in foreclosure.

Beitler's partner, LR Development, also is co-owner of the site that developer Carley would buy for the Calatrava tower.

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